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AUTHOR Hui, Max; Leung, Lily
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ABSTRACT

This paper begins with a brief review of some of the controversies about linking language and content instruction in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. It then describes an attempt at fostering such a link through collaboration between the language teachers and the content teachers in an Academic Communication and Study Skills course at the University of Hong Kong. While the collaboration has resulted in the production of six discipline-specific language modules, it has given rise to a number of issues in course administration, staff development, and student assessment. Drawing on the experiences involved in designing these two modules, these issues and their practical implications are discussed. (JL)

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Linking Language and Content Instruction in the Social Sciences

Max Hui and Lily Leung[1]

This paper begins with a brief review of some of the controversies about linking language and content instruction in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. It then describes an attempt at fostering such a link through collaboration between the language teachers and the content teachers in an Academic Communication and Study Skills (ACSS) course at the University of Hong Kong (HKU). While the collaboration has resulted in the production of six discipline-specific language modules, it has given rise to a number of issues in course administration, staff development and student assessment. We will discuss these issues and their practical implications, drawing upon our experiences of designing two of the modules. We believe that these issues need to be adequately addressed in order to enhance the effectiveness of the link between language and content instruction.

Should language and content instruction be linked?

In the ELT literature, there has been a growing body of work advocating a greater link between language and content instruction (Mohan, 1979, 1986; Cantoni-Harvey, 1987; Crandall, 1987; Shih, 1986; Thaiss, 1987; Benesch, 1988). One of the more extensively reported approaches to establishing such a link has been the 'adjunct model' (Snow and Brinton, 1988, Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 1989, Snow and Brinton, 1990). In an adjunct program, a language course and a content course (e.g. introductory courses to Sociology and Psychology) are linked by the shared content base and mutually coordinated assignments. Through the close coordination among staff of the linked courses, the language syllabus is dovetailed with that of the content course. Although the format of adjunct programmes may vary among institutions, a common requirement is that students attend the language and content courses concurrently.

The foremost justification for link courses such as the adjunct programme is their high face validity in addressing the academic needs of ESL students. Because the language course shares the substantive content and assignments with the content course, it not only takes into account the eventual uses the students will make of the target language, but also integrates into its curriculum the actual language and cognitive skills required of the content course. There are other pedagogical advantages for a language course to share the informational content of a content course. Students would, for instance, perceive the relevance of such a course more readily than that of a general language course. This tends to enhance their motivation to learn and hence the effectiveness of the course. A further advantage is that students' shared knowledge and learning experience in a discipline could facilitate and substantiate their discussions. Language learning becomes more likely to succeed as it takes place in a meaningful and contextualized form, with the focus on acquiring and sharing information.

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[1]**Lily Leung** has taught English for Academic Purposes courses at the University of Hong Kong since February 1988. Her current area of research is in the teaching of writing.

Max Hui is currently a member of the teaching staff in the English Centre, the University of Hong Kong. His research interests include the teaching of literature, and the teaching of English through short stories, novels, and films.

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In spite of these advantages, there are notable objections to linking language and content instruction. When discussing the feasibility of link writing programs, Spack (1988) contends that the teaching of writing in the disciplines is best left to the teachers of those disciplines. Her first and foremost reason is the inadequacy of English teachers in dealing with content at two levels. At one level, they may be deficient in the knowledge of the subject matter itself, and "therefore find themselves in the uncomfortable position of being less knowledgeable than their students" (p.37). At another level, they may lack the expertise of writing in the disciplines, which "requires a complete, active, struggling engagement with the facts and principles of a discipline, an encounter with the discipline's texts and the incorporation of them into one's own work, the framing of one's knowledge within the myriad conventions that help define a discipline, the persuading of other investigators that one's knowledge is legitimate." (Rose, 1985, p.359 quoted in Spack, 1988). According to Spack, a literature review on programmes which do succeed in teaching students to write in other disciplines reveals that the teachers are themselves immersed in the discipline. They are either teachers within the discipline or those who possess a strong background in the disciplinary discourse (p.40). The importance for the adjunct language teachers to be familiar with the material of the content course is also emphasized by Snow and Brinton (1990, P.178).

Another often mentioned limitation of link courses is their administrative cost (e.g. Snow and Brinton 1990). Since the success of the programme depends to a large extent on the success of the collaboration between two departments, a high level of goodwill and commitment is required. This crucial feature, however, is not easily attainable in many tertiary institutions. Subject teachers may perceive language learning to be entirely outside their brief and thus reject the proposed involvement in this kind of collaborative exercise. Colloboration also means extra time and workload which may not be adequately recognized or provided for by the administration.

Linking language and content instruction on the ACSS course

The ACSS course, which aims to enhance HKU students' intellectual fluency in English, was first piloted with the students pursuing the degree of Bachelor of Business and Administration (BBA) in 1990-91. When we first developed the course, we were faced with at least two options in the selection of content. The first option was to stay within the traditional ESL boundaries and adopt content from 'general' topic areas ranging from language to pollution to AIDS. The second option was to move into the confines of students' disciplines and use the disciplinary content. We decided that we would attempt the latter as much as possible in the hope of enhancing the relevance of the course to the academic interest of the students. The course content was therefore oriented towards the social science subjects studied by the BBA students, though some materials based on current affairs were also included. Reading passages were largely taken from introductory texts on Sociology, Economics, Psychology and Management, and some class time was actually devoted to the discussion of an assignment on Management. The latter activity was very positively rated by students in the post-course evaluation questionnaire, where they indicated a strong demand for more of this type of discipline-related activity on the ACSS course.

This led the course designers to build in a more discipline-related component in the course in 1991-92 when it was extended to students pursuing the degrees of Bachelor of Social Work and Bachelor of Social Sciences. Twelve 'liaison persons', six from the Language department and six from the Faculty of Social Science, were identified and paired to produce six discipline-related modules, each of which consisted of a disciplinary project and a set of related materials. The modules included Management Studies, Social Work, Sociology, Psychology, Political Science and Statistics. Students were required to study one of these modules in addition to the common core materials.

The two-semester 60-hour course was divided into two distinct but related phases, the first practising academic communication skills in the context of a language-related project; the second consolidating and extending these skills in the context of a Social Science disciplinary project (Figure 1).

The principal aim of the project work was to replicate an investigative cycle, similar to that expected of students when tackling a major academic assignment. This required students to define the problem; to locate, select, analyse, evaluate and synthesise relevant information; and to articulate an intellectual position or point of view. Each project culminated in an oral presentation and a written assignment.

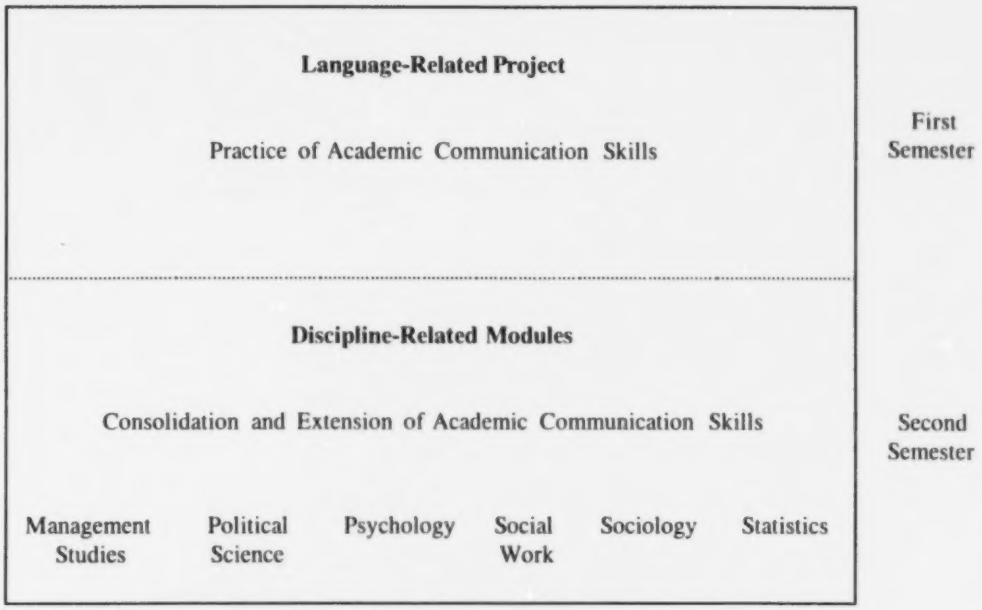

Figure 1: The ACSS syllabus

In the language-related project, the course material dealt primarily with the medium of instruction in Hong Kong, but the eventual project topic choices could be related to any language issues of interest to the students and teachers. Potential topics included: "Should Putonghua be made a compulsory subject for all secondary students in Hong Kong?", "Are women better at learning languages than men?", "What are the differences between good and poor language learners?", "Is rap a legitimate form of language?" and many others. On the other hand, the disciplinary project was primarily based on materials and topics negotiated by language teachers and subject teachers. The topics and formats were wide ranging both within and across the six disciplinary projects. To give a few examples, they included Sociology essays on 'Sexism in advertising', 'The hidden curriculum', Social Work reports on 'Housing Services', 'The decline of volunteerism', and Statistics research proposals on 'The adequacy of the Hong Kong system of water reservoirs'.

The rationale for this two-part syllabus was that while we reckoned that it was desirable to introduce discipline-related content into the course, we understood that time and resources available would not allow a full conversion of the course into adjunct programmes. We were also aware of our potential deficiencies in teaching disciplinary content as described by Spack (1988). We therefore opted for a combination of content from both our own discipline (Language) and the students' disciplines (Social Sciences). In the former, we could comfortably and fully use our disciplinary expertise to guide the students on both linguistic and substantive issues. In the latter, we moved away from our own disciplinary territory into the students', playing mainly the role of an 'intelligent' lay audience to be informed about substantive issues. At the same time we continued to offer linguistic help to students when they attempted to explain, summarise, clarify and evaluate these substantive issues. We understood that the demarcation between language and content was not particularly helpful because we believed that

language and content often could not be satisfactorily compartmentalized and addressed separately in teaching. The role of an 'intelligent audience' also raised concern about the credibility of the language teachers in producing and teaching disciplinary materials. We, therefore, perceive a need for reviewing and perhaps improving this situation. We will return to this point later in our discussion.

In the next part, we will describe our experiences of collaborating with the content teachers in producing two of the modules - Management Studies and Social Work.

The Management Studies module

In the first meeting between the liaison persons responsible for the Management Studies module, a number of issues were discussed:

1) What area of Management Studies should the module focus on?
2) How long should the final written product be?
3) Should students work individually or in small groups?
4) In what format should the final product be written -- as a report or an essay?
5) Should empirical data be collected and included?

After some discussion, negotiation and compromising, three conclusions were reached:

1) the topic could be anything, as long as it was within the area of "Business Studies";
2) the final product, which would be in the form of a report, should be around 1,500 words;
3) students would work in small groups.

While the meeting was useful and much work was accomplished, the language liaison teacher left the meeting feeling slightly disconcerted. His colleague in the Management Studies Department was polite, co-operative, and at times obliging, but was not particularly enthusiastic about the project. There was little doubt that he would like his students to learn something from this project. Yet, he was also very explicit in stating that he would not like his students to be burdened with too much work. He emphasized that his students already carried a full load and that the English Centre should not overwork them. To him (and probably to many students), the ACSS course was only a marginal course with no credit-bearing status[1] in the Social Science curriculum, so the expectation of students on this course should be reduced to the minimum.

Bearing the agreed conclusions as well as this explicit message in mind, the language teacher decided to adopt the 'case method ' of Marketing as the topic of the module. It was felt that when compared to Accounting or Finance, Marketing was less technical and more accessible to language teachers. The discussion of marketing issues also involved more use of language as opposed to statistics and figures. The module required students to produce a report and to give an oral presentation.

At the end of the semester, lecturers from the Management Studies Department were invited to come and evaluate the oral presentation. A portion of the students' reports were also sent to the department for co-assessment. Overall, the whole operation went rather smoothly.

The Social Work module

When compared with the Management Studies module, the Social Work module was in a slightly more advantageous position in that it was not necessary to design a new project, as the Social Work Department had already set up one for their students. It was agreed that this project would be done by students for both departments. Overloading the students, therefore, did not present itself as a

problem. However, some adjustments in the two departments were still necessary. For instance, the Social Work Department had to change the language of project presentations from Cantonese to English because of the nature of the ACSS course. The English Centre, when developing associated module materials on report writing, had to use as much Social Work content as possible.

Although collaboration was smooth at the beginning, problems arose when there was a change of liaison person in the Social Work Department in the middle of the term. As this new liaison person was also new to the Department, communication about the requirements of the Social Work project was not always successful. One example was that in spite of our initial agreement on requiring individual reports from students, some Social Work tutors did not adhere to the requirement. The consequence was that some teachers were faced with disconcerted students querying the inconsistent requirements among groups.

Another example was related to the co-assessment of the written project reports. Although the language liaison teacher made an effort to initiate a discussion of the results of co-assessment, she was eventually informed that the subject teachers' grades were irretrievable in the process of conflating scores of all subjects into one grade for students. An additional difficulty arose in the second year of implementation (1992/93) when the Social Work liaison teacher attempted to consolidate the link between the disciplinary and language courses by proposing the same tutorial topics for both courses. The fact that his proposal was turned down by his colleagues revealed that perhaps not all subject teachers appreciated the link between their discipline and language instruction.

In spite of these problems, the second year of implementation witnessed some informative dialogue between the language and subject teachers. At the beginning of the academic year, five of the Social Work teachers accepted the liaison teachers' invitation to a meeting to discuss the English needs of their students. The language liaison teacher was supplied with some useful information on the students' needs and difficulties in using English in the disciplinary studies.

Reflections on the collaborative experiences

After developing and teaching the modules for two years, three issues have become apparent to us.

1) Collaboration between departments

Our experiences have shown that collaboration between departments is not easy at all. One main difficulty is that administrative practicalities have placed a very high demand on time and effort from both departments. Finding time to meet, trivial as the problem may sound, is often difficult, and can sometimes hamper the progress of work. In some cases, a failure to meet to discuss things thoroughly can lead to communication breakdown and undesirable consequences.

Another difficulty is that the two departments may have divergent beliefs concerning how 'demanding' the modules should be. For instance, in the case of Management Studies, while language teachers would like to feature the discipline-specific project as a major component of the course, some subject teachers may worry that students are over-burdened.

A third difficulty is that language and subject teachers are not equally enthusiastic and convinced about collaboration. Although most of the subject teachers comply with requests from the English Centre, they are generally less keen on playing an active role in the development and evaluation of these modules. Some of them may even perceive the collaborative work to be completely outside their brief. In this academic year (1992/93), some difficulties were reported by language liaison teachers other than us in inviting subject teachers to co-assess students' oral presentations of their projects. There were also

difficulties in persuading some teachers (both language and subject) to become actively involved in liaison work.

We believe that unless there is more communication between the departments, and unless there is a greater conviction among teachers that this kind of collaborative work will benefit the students, the development of the modules will become stagnant and the rejection of collaboration will increase. Continual support and constructive feedback from their counterparts are especially crucial to the material writers of these modules, because they need to be fully aware of the new developments in the subjects, and the ways in which these new developments may alter the needs of the students. In order to encourage teaching staff from both departments to continue collaborating, the University will also need to demonstrate its full support by providing time and recognition for such work.

2) Staff development

A central question arising from the link between content and language instruction is related to the amount of disciplinary knowledge which needs to be possessed by the language teachers. How much do they need to know about the discipline in order to produce and teach a module which will not just skate over the surface of the content but engage learners in a deeper level of analysis of the subject?

It seems to us that there are three possible answers to this question. First, although the material writer and the language teachers can never claim to be experts in the subject, they can still act as an 'intelligent audience' and provide guidance to students as language experts. The second answer is that the material writers can receive some formal training in the subject they are writing about. For example, the Management Studies module writer can take a course in 'Introduction to Marketing'. When writing the module, he can then provide his colleagues with a more informative and instructive teachers' guide. The third possibility is to encourage both the material writer and the teachers to be immersed in the subject. As suggested by Snow and Brinton (1990:178),because English language development is done:

> "through the medium of the content material, the language instructor must also be familiar with this material. Thus for the English/ESL instructor to be maximally effective, a substantial amount of time must be devoted to:
>
> (1) learning the material of the content course,
> (2) developing language teaching materials based on the content, and
> (3) providing feedback both on the linguistic aspects of the students' work and (to a lesser degree) on the quality of content."

In the long run, immersion such as that proposed by Snow and Brinton appears to be the best option as it will improve the language teachers' disciplinary knowledge and hence their credibility in producing and teaching the disciplinary materials. But in order to implement this option, departmental support in terms of time, finance, and official recognition is essential. Staff continuity is also extremely important. It is highly desirable for both departments to assign the same staff to teaching and liaising the same modules for at least a few years. Such an arrangement will not only ensure a better continual development and renewal of the modules, but will also enhance the mutual understanding and trust among the liasion teachers from both departments, which is crucial to successful collaboration.

3) Co-Assessment

In evaluating students' success in completing these discipline-related modules, subject teachers are invited to assess the oral presentations and written reports of the disciplinary projects. This co-assessment exercise proves to be instructive in that it enables teachers in both departments to be more openly articulate about their assessment criteria. We become more informed about the resemblances and discrepancies in the major concerns of both departments in assessing students' communicative

performance. This greater awareness is beneficial to our teaching as it helps us reorientate our expectations of students and at the same time make these expectations explicit to our students, who can then have a clear goal to work towards. Moreover, the knowledge that their work will be assessed by their subject teachers appears to have improved the motivation of students.

Conclusion

Student feedback regarding the discipline-related projects has been in general more positive than the language-related project. This in a way has confirmed the value of instituting a disciplinary component on the ACSS course. Our experiences of collaborating with subject teachers have also demonstrated the importance and usefulness of maintaining a dialogue between the two departments to ensure the adequacy of this disciplinary component in meeting the needs of the students. However, the difficulties in its implementation, as described earlier, will need to be addressed if the link between language and content instruction is to be maximally effective.

Note

1. The ACSS course (to be retitled as "English for Academic Communication") will become credit-bearing from 1993/94 onwards. Whether this change of status will lead to a change of perception about the English course among students and subject teachers is still a question to be answered.

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